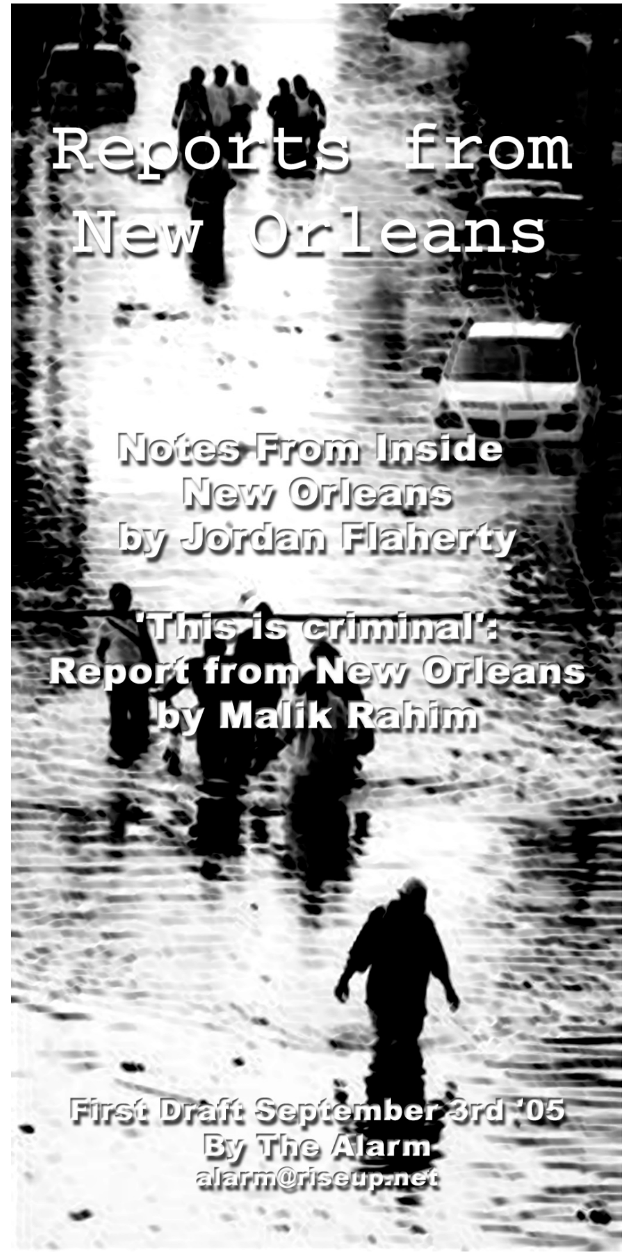


Reports Taken from Houston Indymedia of New Orleans Activists during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina

http://houston.indymedia.org



Notes From Inside New Orleans

By Jordan Flaherty

Friday, September 2, 2005

I just left New Orleans a couple hours ago. I traveled from the apartment I was staying in by boat to a helicopter to a refugee camp. If anyone wants to examine the attitude of federal and state officials towards the victims of hurricane Katrina, I advise you to visit one of the refugee camps.

In the refugee camp I just left, on the I-10 freeway near Causeway, thousands of people (at least 90% black and poor) stood and squatted in mud and trash behind metal barricades, under an unforgiving sun, with heavily armed soldiers standing guard over them. When a bus would come through, it would stop at a random spot, state police would open a gap in one of the barricades, and people would rush for the bus, with no information given about where the bus was going. Once inside (we were told) evacuees would be told where the bus was taking them - Baton Rouge, Houston, Arkansas, Dallas, or other locations. I was told that if you boarded a bus bound for Arkansas (for example), even people with family and a place to stay in Baton Rouge would not be allowed to get out of the bus as it passed through Baton Rouge. You had no choice but to go to the shelter in Arkansas. If you had people willing to come to New Orleans to pick you up, they could not come within 17 miles of the camp.

I traveled throughout the camp and spoke to Red Cross workers, Salvation Army workers, National Guard, and state police, and although they were friendly, no one could give me any details on when buses would arrive, how many, where they would go to, or any other information. I spoke to the several teams of journalists nearby, and asked if any of them had been able to get any information from any federal or state officials on any of these questions, and all of them, from Australian tv to local Fox affiliates complained of an unorganized, non-communicative, mess. One cameraman told me “as someone who’s been here in this camp for two days, the only information I can give you is this: get out by nightfall. You don’t want to be here at night.”

There was also no visible attempt by any of those running the camp to set up any sort of transparent and consistent system, for instance a line to get on buses, a way to register contact information or find family members, special needs services for children and infirm, phone services, treatment for possible disease exposure, nor even a single trash can.

The Alarm/1301 Richmond Av Apt U-9/ Houston, TX, 77006
http://alarmhouston.org

Below are some small, grassroots and New Orleans-based resources, organizations and institutions that will need your support in the coming months.

Social Justice:
www.jjpl.org
www.iftheycanlearn.org
www.nolaps.org
www.thepeoplesinstitute.org/
www.criticalresistance.org/index.php?name=crno_home

Cultural Resources:
www.backstreetculturalmuseum.com
www.ashecac.org/
http://198.66.50.128/gallery/
www.nolahumanrights.org
http://www.freewebs.com/ironrail/
http://www.girlgangproductions.com/

Current Info and Resources:
http://neworleans.craigslist.org/about/help/katrina_cl.html

To understand the dimensions of this tragedy, its important to look at New Orleans itself.

For those who have not lived in New Orleans, you have missed a incredible, glorious, vital, city. A place with a culture and energy unlike anywhere else in the world. A 70% African-American city where resistance to white supremacy has supported a generous, subversive and unique culture of vivid beauty. From jazz, blues and hiphop, to secondlines, Mardi Gras Indians, Parades, Beads, Jazz Funerals, and red beans and rice on Monday nights, New Orleans is a place of art and music and dance and sexuality and liberation unlike anywhere else in the world.

It is a city of kindness and hospitality, where walking down the block can take two hours because you stop and talk to someone on every porch, and where a community pulls together when someone is in need. It is a city of extended families and social networks filling the gaps left by city, state and federal governments that have abdicated their responsibility for the public welfare. It is a city where someone you walk past on the street not only asks how you are, they wait for an answer.

It is also a city of exploitation and segregation and fear. The city of New Orleans has a population of just over 500,000 and was expecting 300 murders this year, most of them centered on just a few, overwhelmingly black, neighborhoods. Police have been quoted as saying that they don't need to search out the perpetrators, because usually a few days after a shooting, the attacker is shot in revenge.

There is an atmosphere of intense hostility and distrust between much of Black New Orleans and the N.O. Police Department. In recent months, officers have been accused of everything from drug running to corruption to theft. In separate incidents, two New Orleans police officers were recently charged with rape (while in uniform), and there have been several high profile police killings of unarmed youth, including the murder of Jenard Thomas, which has inspired ongoing weekly protests for several months.

The city has a 40% illiteracy rate, and over 50% of black ninth graders will not graduate in four years. Louisiana spends on average $4,724 per child's education and ranks 48th in the country for lowest teacher salaries. The equivalent of more than two classrooms of young people drop out of Louisiana schools every day and about 50,000 students are absent from school on any given day. Far too many young black men from New Orleans end up enslaved in Angola Prison, a former slave plantation where inmates still do manual farm labor, and over 90% of inmates eventually die in the prison. It is a city where industry has left, and most remaining jobs are are low-paying, transient, insecure jobs in the service economy.

Race has always been the undercurrent of Louisiana politics. This disaster is one that was constructed out of racism, neglect and incompetence. Hurricane Katrina was theinevitable spark igniting the gasoline of cruelty and corruption. From the neighborhoods left most at risk, to the treatment of the refugees to the the media portrayal of the victims, this disaster is shaped by race.

Louisiana politics is famously corrupt, but with the tragedies of this week our political leaders have defined a new level of incompetence. As hurricane Katrina approached, our Governor urged us to "Pray the hurricane down" to a level two. Trapped in a building two days after the hurricane, we tuned our battery-operated radio into local radio and tv stations, hoping for vital news, and were told that our governor had called for a day of prayer. As rumors and panic began to rule, they was no source of solid dependable information. Tuesday night, politicians and reporters said the water level would rise another 12 feet - instead it stabilized. Rumors spread like wildfire, and the politicians and media only made it worse.

While the rich escaped New Orleans, those with nowhere to go and no way to get there were left behind. Adding salt to the wound, the local and national media have spent the last week demonizing those left behind. As someone that loves New Orleans and the people in it, this is the part of this tragedy that hurts me the most, and it hurts me deeply.

No sane person should classify someone who takes food from indefinitely closed stores in a desperate, starving city as a "looter," but that's just what the media did over and over again. Sheriffs and politicians talked of having troops protect stores instead of perform rescue operations.

Images of New Orleans' hurricane-ravaged population were transformed into black, out-of-control, criminals. As if taking a stereo from a store that will clearly be insured against loss is a greater crime than the governmental neglect and incompetence that did billions of dollars of damage and destroyed a city. This media focus is a tactic, just as the eighties focus on "welfare queens" and "super-predators" obscured the simultaneous and much larger crimes of the Savings and Loan scams and mass layoffs, the hyper-exploited people of New Orleans are being used as a scapegoat to cover up much larger crimes.

City, state and national politicians are the real criminals here. Since at least the mid-1800s, its been widely known the danger faced by flooding to New Orleans. The flood of 1927, which, like this week's events, was more about politics and racism than any kind of natural disaster, illustrated exactly the danger faced. Yet government officials have consistently refused to spend the money to protect this poor,

There's military right here in New Orleans, but for three days they weren't even mobilized. You'd think this was a Third World country.

I'm in the Algiers neighborhood of New Orleans, the only part that isn't flooded. The water is good. Our parks and schools could easily hold 40,000 people, and they're not using any of it.

This is criminal. These people are dying for no other reason than the lack of organization.

Everything is needed, but we're still too disorganized. I'm asking people to go ahead and gather donations and relief supplies but to hold on to them for a few days until we have a way to put them to good use.

I'm challenging my party, the Green Party, to come down here and help us just as soon as things are a little more organized. The Republicans and Democrats didn't do anything to prevent this or plan for it and don't seem to care if everyone dies.

Malik's phone is working. He welcomes calls from old friends and anyone with questions or ideas for saving lives. To reach him, call the Bay View at (415) 671-0789. Malik is a Veteran of the Black Panther and Green Parties.

They sat on the freeway for about three hours, because someone said they'd be rescued and taken to the Superdome. Finally they just started walking, had to walk six and a half miles.

When they got to the Superdome, my son wasn't allowed in - I don't know why - so his wife and kids wouldn't go in. They kept walking, and they happened to run across a guy with a tow truck that they knew, and he gave them his own personal truck.

When they got here, they had no gas, so I had to punch a hole in my gas tank to give them some gas, and now I'm trapped. I'm getting around by bicycle.

People from Placquemine Parish were rescued on a ferry and dropped off on a dock near here. All day they were sitting on the dock in the hot sun with no food, no water. Many were in a daze; they've lost everything.

They were all sitting there surrounded by armed guards. We asked the guards could we bring them water and food. My mother and all the other church ladies were cooking for them, and we have plenty of good water.

But the guards said, "No. If you don't have enough water and food for everybody, you can't give anything." Finally the people were hauled off on school buses from other parishes.

You know Robert King Wilkerson (the only one of the Angola 3 political prisoners who's been released). He's been back in New Orleans working hard, organizing, helping people. Now nobody knows where he is. His house was destroyed. Knowing him, I think he's out trying to save lives, but I'm worried.

The people who could help are being shipped out. People who want to stay, who have the skills to save lives and rebuild are being forced to go to Houston.

It's not like New Orleans was caught off guard. This could have been prevented.

overwhelmingly black, city. While FEMA and others warned of the urgent impending danger to New Orleans and put forward proposals for funding to reinforce and protect the city, the Bush administration, in every year since 2001, has cut or refused to fund New Orleans flood control, and ignored scientists warnings of increased hurricanes as a result of global warming. And, as the dangers rose with the floodlines, the lack of coordinated response dramatized vividly the callous disregard of our elected leaders.

The aftermath from the 1927 flood helped shape the elections of both a US President and a Governor, and ushered in the southern populist politics of Huey Long.

In the coming months, billions of dollars will likely flood into New Orleans. This money can either be spent to usher in a "New Deal" for the city, with public investment, creation of stable union jobs, new schools, cultural programs and housing restoration, or the city can be "rebuilt and revitalized" to a shell of its former self, with newer hotels, more casinos, and with chain stores and theme parks replacing the former neighborhoods, cultural centers and corner jazz clubs.

Long before Katrina, New Orleans was hit by a hurricane of poverty, racism disinvestment, deindustrialization and corruption. Simply the damage from this pre-Katrina hurricane will take billions to repair.

Now that the money is flowing in, and the world's eyes are focused on Katrina, its vital that progressive-minded people take this opportunity to fight for a rebuilding with justice. New Orleans is a special place, and we need to fight for its rebirth.

Jordan Flaherty is a union organizer and an editor of Left Turn Magazine (www.leftturn.org). He is not planning on moving out of New Orleans.

“This is criminal': Report from New Orleans

Malik Rahim

New Orleans, Sept. 1, 2005

It's criminal. From what you're hearing, the people trapped in New Orleans are nothing but looters. We're told we should be more "neighborly." But nobody talked about being neighborly until after the people who could afford to leave -- left.

If you ain't got no money in America, you're on your own. People were told to go to the Superdome, but they have no food, no water there. And before they could get in, people had to stand in line for 4-5 hours in the rain because everybody was being searched one by one at the entrance.

I can understand the chaos that happened after the tsunami, because they had no warning, but here there was plenty of warning. In the three days before the hurricane hit, we knew it was coming and everyone could have been evacuated.

We have Amtrak here that could have carried everybody out of town. There were enough school buses that could have evacuated 20,000 people easily, but they just let them be flooded. My son watched 40 buses go underwater - they just wouldn't move them, afraid they'd be stolen.

People who could afford to leave were so afraid someone would steal what they own that they just let it all be flooded. They could have let a family without a vehicle borrow their extra car, but instead they left it behind to be destroyed.

There are gangs of white vigilantes near here riding around in pickup trucks, all of them armed, and any young Black they see who they figure doesn't belong in their community, they shoot him. I tell them, "Stop! You're going to start a riot."

When you see all the poor people with no place to go, feeling alone and helpless and angry, I say this is a consequence of HOPE VI. New Orleans took all the HUD money it could get to tear down public housing, and families and neighbors who'd relied on each other for generations were uprooted and torn apart.

Most of the people who are going through this now had already lost touch with the only community they'd ever known. Their community was torn down and they were scattered. They'd already lost their real homes, the only place where they knew everybody, and now the places they've been staying are destroyed.

But nobody cares. They're just lawless looters ... dangerous.

The hurricane hit at the end of the month, the time when poor people are most vulnerable. Food stamps don't buy enough but for about three weeks of the month, and by the end of the month everyone runs out. Now they have no way to get their food stamps or any money, so they just have to take what they can to survive.

Many people are getting sick and very weak. From the toxic water that people are walking through, little scratches and sores are turning into major wounds.

People whose homes and families were not destroyed went into the city right away with boats to bring the survivors out, but law enforcement told them they weren't needed. They are willing and able to rescue thousands, but they're not allowed to.

Every day countless volunteers are trying to help, but they're turned back Almost all the rescue that's been done has been done by volunteers anyway.

My son and his family - his wife and kids, ages 1, 5 and 8 - were flooded out of their home when the levee broke. They had to swim out until they found an abandoned building with two rooms above water level.

There were 21 people in those two rooms for a day and a half. A guy in a boat who just said "I'm going to help regardless" rescued them and took them to Highway I-10 and dropped them there.